

Choral connections

Lucy Jackson

While the choral songs in Greek tragedy and comedy can often seem obscure (not to mention hellishly difficult to translate), with a little contextual knowledge they soon become the most fascinating and rewarding part of the play. In Euripides' *Medea*, we see an example of how understanding the history and theatrical potential of the chorus for ancient audiences can enrich our appreciation of choral performance in drama today.

The first form of drama

A group of people singing and dancing in unison – a chorus – was the most widespread and long-lived performing art in ancient Greece. A choral performance in many ways was the original form of 'drama' as we know it (in its most simple formulation, drama is when person A performs B in front of person C). It required no theatre building, no set or specific costume; all it required was level ground (the ancient Greek word 'choros' refers both to the group and to the place where choral performance would happen) and an audience. This was one of the Greeks' favourite forms of entertainment and one of the best ways to hear and experience their myths.

The chorus continued to have an equally important role to play in the extraordinary popularity of tragedy throughout the ancient world. We know that audiences responded most strongly to the choral parts of ancient drama. They learnt the lyrics (and possibly the dances too), and some, if they had the time and money necessary, would go travelling to all the theatres in the region near Athens just to 'hear the choruses'. What with the combination of music, dance, and voices, all within a meticulously rehearsed group of performers, this is hardly surprising.

Choral performance outside of drama in ancient Greece

In contrast to what is often the case in modern performances of these plays, the chorus was the most familiar element in drama for the ancient Athenians. Audiences would have been dancing and singing in choruses from a young age. We know that every tragedy would have had a chorus of twelve or fifteen male performers, and every comedy a chorus of

twenty-four. But outside of drama you would also have seen choruses at religious and civic celebrations (and there were a lot of these throughout the year) where as many as fifty people could be involved in one single chorus; and at some festivals you would see ten or twenty of these fifty-strong choruses in competition with each other. Around 2500 men and boys would have participated in some kind of choral performance every single year. Although they never performed on stage in ancient Athens, women would also have participated in the choruses of female-only venues and festivals. We know about female choral performances outside of Athens too, such as the island of Delos, where the performers attracted ardent admirers and won long-lived fame.

Most major events in the lives of an ancient Greek, such as wedding celebrations and funerals, were celebrated with choral song and dance performed by members of the community. The reason for this was simple. Choral speech and song was a key means of communicating with the gods. At the festivals where these choruses were performing, it was thought that the gods were listening and, it was hoped, enjoying these mortal choral performances. The effort it took to compose and rehearse such performances made these precious and potent offerings to their immortal audience.

From civic celebration to dramatic representation

Ancient drama was made distinct from this ubiquitous form of 'choral' drama by having at least two individuals who were separate from the chorus and who interacted with each other as well as with the choral group. This new form of theatre is more recognisable for us as it begins to incorporate a more realistic representation of individuals. The chorus of tragedies

(and comedies), while retaining many of the characteristics it had in its more free-form traditional performances, began to take on more clearly defined fictional roles appropriate for each play's plot: slave women, Furies, soldiers, and (very occasionally) citizens.

The fictional aspect of these roles would have been made all the more conspicuous by the use of masks in drama and when these male performers were required to 'play' a group of women (this is hilariously portrayed in the first scene of Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen* – well worth a look!). And yet, the chorus's potential to portray both a fictional and a non-fictional role within a play is one of the keys to its dramatic power. We see a great example of how choral identity 'flickers' in this way, a bit like a hologram, when the chorus of Corinthian women in Euripides' *Medea* sing the following:

*The children of Erechtheus, from ancient times,
have basked in the graces of the blessed gods.
They dwell in holy Athens, that unpillaged land, and
feast ever on the glorious food of wisdom. (824–9)*

Despite the play being set in the city of Corinth, it would have been difficult for an audience to block out entirely the fact that they were sitting right there, in Athens, while this chorus of Athenian men spoke in praise of their own city. Here we see how the separation between the fictional and real identity of these choral performers could be blurred.

The flickering of the 'hologram' chorus

The usual rules of performance as we think of them, particularly in terms of 'naturalistic' performance, do not apply to the chorus. Unbound from realistic restrictions, the chorus can move easily between being present in the world of the audience to the world of the play (as we have already seen in the choral passage above), and then on to other worlds far apart in time and space. Through their evocative descriptions and probably their movements too they provide a window onto an ever-shifting landscape – a landscape that can be entirely shaped and

determined by the poet. A group might refer at one moment to the here and now. A minute later they might imagine themselves to be in a faraway land, in the distant past or in the future. We see an example of this when the chorus retell one part of Medea's history:

*You left your father's house
With your heart enflamed,
Sailed through the sea's twin rocks
To a foreign strand.
Now your bed's empty and your name dishonoured,
Yourself reviled and exiled from this land.* (431–8)

The connection of choral performance to non-dramatic, religious occasions is also one that can shape our readings of the chorus in drama. In the same way that hearing a school hymn or national anthem can remind us of a particular time or situation, a chorus could remind audiences of specific religious rituals by using particular words or poetic metre. Again, we see this in action in one of the odes of *Medea*. The opening lines of the first *stasimon* refer to the traditional choral performance genre of praise poetry known as 'epinician'. The chorus sing:

*Back to their sources
Run the holy rivers,
Order and the world
Stand upside down.
Now it is men whose words are treacherous,
Now it is men whose oaths the gods disown.*

*The dawn of honour breaks
For the race of women.
Slander's poisoned tongue
Shall stab at us no more.
The faithlessness of women – that old theme –
No longer ease the minstrel's daily chore.* (410–20)

The chorus here are performing a piece of praise poetry of the kind that would have been commonly heard at civic celebrations the length and breadth of Greece. The usual tell-tale signs for this kind of genre are all there. Honour is given to the object of praise, here women ('the dawn of hon-our breaks for the race of women'); we also see striking, elemental imagery as is common in other such praise poems ('back to their sources run the holy rivers...'); the responsibility of the poet is highlighted ('...the minstrel's daily chore'); and, in the Greek, the same kind of poetic metre is used (a collection of short and long syllables known as 'dactylo-epitrite') as was common in other kinds of praise poetry.

In all these ways we see how this choral ode in the *Medea* is designed to evoke associations and memories in the minds of the audience connected with a particular ritual occasion: the positive praise of a member of the community. In some ways, at this moment in the play, the chorus exist both inside and outside of the drama.

Choral complexity

But it is not enough only to observe these resonances. We should also ask how that changes and shapes our responses to the character of the chorus. By appropriating verbal and rhythmic motifs usually used to praise men and applying them to women, the chorus of *Medea* perform a powerful and potentially disturbing reworking of a familiar choral genre. For those in the audience who might already suspect that Medea will go on to commit something truly terrible and definitely unworthy of praise, this kind of glorification of women and their reputation will be particularly disconcerting. In their praise of someone who will damage, not enhance, the community, the Corinthian women read the situation spectacularly wrong. The chorus, then, provide the audience with a visceral but complicated way of investing in the action. Does Medea's treatment by Jason mean she *should* be praised? Or will her later actions prove her to be just as the older poets, said worthy

of 'slander's poisoned tongue'?

The flexibility of the chorus can at times seem overwhelming to the modern mind – such is the capability for them to shape-shift; there is so much choice for what they can do, who they can be, where they can be, when they can be, and why. It is for this very reason that it is so difficult to say exactly what the function of the chorus in tragedy is. The chorus was whatever the poet made of it in any given play. What is more, the chorus was able to connect with the world outside of the theatre by reminding audiences of the emotions they had experienced in the choral dances of every-day life. Far from being a problem, the flexibility of the chorus was something that was used extensively by ancient poets.

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